

# JEWISH RESISTANCE IN WWII

*By David Rosenthal*

**H**arold Werner was a member of the Jewish underground force that operated in Poland during the Nazi occupation. As a participant and witness to that struggle for Jewish survival, Werner was well qualified to compose an account of that singular effort. He did so in a book entitled *Fighting Back: A Memoir of Jewish Resistance in World War Two*, published by Columbia University Press in 1992. The introduction is by Sir Martin Gilbert, the distinguished British historian who is himself an authority on the Holocaust.

Harold Werner writes in detail about the sabotage exploits of the Jewish resistance group against the German army. Members of his unit blew up trains, attacked local military posts, and even shot down a German plane. They also managed to lead a group of Jews out of the ghetto into the forest near Parnow. In addition to fighting the Nazis directly, the Jews had to fend off the hostility of the Poles who were supposed to join forces with them against the common foe.

This book reopens the wounds of those years, but it also reminds us that there is a great deal of important data about Jewish resistance, written in Yiddish and in Hebrew, that has not been made available to the general public. The reason for this state of affairs lies in the fact that these two languages (in which so many of the original materials were written) are foreign to most American Holocaust scholars. Added to this ignorance is the dubious role of "publicity" in American-Jewish life. Instead of truthful accounts describing the memorable deeds of that period, we often get nothing more than ballyhoo about the "exceptionally heroic accomplishments" of current

"celebrities."

Thus, large segments of the population are kept ignorant of a chapter of history which would deepen national Jewish consciousness. What they get is a surrogate, a cluster of stories suited to the popular — and uncritical — taste.

**T**he broad Jewish partisan front extended from the woods near Warsaw, through the forest around Lublin, where remnants of ghetto Jews who had escaped from Parnow, Pulaw, Krashnik and other places found refuge in the woods and swamps between Vilna and Minsk. These geographical details do not span the complete scope of that front. The Jews there suffered from a double-barreled hatred: from the Germans, on the one hand, and the Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian-White Russian, on the other. During the war years the forests became the domain of Jewish bravery, Jewish struggle and Jewish martyrdom.

The changed situation in the forest during the war years becomes painfully clear against the background of Joseph Opatoshu's novel, *In Polish Woods*. What follows is his characterization of the forest Jews of former times:

Mordecai, his father, his grandfather and his great-grandfathers back to the sixth generation, had all been born in the Lipovetz Forest. They intermarried, lived as a clan . . . Whenever one of them celebrated a wedding (as happened often), more than 300 guests came — and that was only the immediate family . . . Every branch of the family brought along its own rabbi and its own klezmer-band, who played out in the open air. And the guests danced in every room of the house, in the barns, in the woods . . .

Wherever a new Jewish community took root, Mordecai's family sent them hewn lumber, providing another portion of Poland with synagogues and study-houses where Jews could gather to pray. Wherever a Talmud Torah or a *bes-medresh* needed wood for the winter, Mordecai's family sent it — furnishing kindling for half a province.

The Jewish lumber-workers placed at the service of the World War II partisans their familiarity with the local roads and the little-known paths and rivers. The loggers, the sawyers, the men who tied up the lumber and shipped it — they were the ones who guided many of the partisans through the mud and swamps and helped them link up with other fighting units.

How large was the partisan movement? Moshe Kaganovitch, author of "The War of the Jewish Partisans in Eastern Europe," (Buenos Aires, 1956) estimates that the number of partisans in Volhynia and Western Byelorussia was 12 to 14 thousand. Some Israeli scholars arrive at the same figure. If the partisans of the Lublin district and of all other parts of Poland are added to this, the total number of partisans on the territory of the former Polish state totals 20 to 25 thousand.

The general partisan movement was not free of anti-Semitism. According to chroniclers and accounts by Jews at the front, there was a fanatical Jew-hating element in almost every unit and every detachment — "just like in the good old days." Often these anti-Semites were criminals and former Nazi collaborators. There were instances when Jews were shot for "spying." Their accusers charged: "How could anyone have escaped from the ghetto without spying?" Jewish partisans were accepted into detachments on the condition of cutting all ties to other family members. Another condition: that they obtain their own weapons.

In Sh. Kacjerginski's *Between Hammer and Sickle* (Paris, 1949), in which the destruction of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union is described, the author, a partisan, asks: "Shall I recount here the experience of those Jews who managed to get to the partisans in the forest? Shall I now tell about the anti-Semitism of those Soviet commanders who were sent in from the other side of the forest? About the large number of Jews who became victims of their 'own' partisans? No. We have already had

enough of those kinds of reports . . ."

Dr. Shlomo Wolkowitski, a partisan from Slonim and a doctor who served a number of partisan detachments, summed up the situation in this way: "If the Jews had not been so harassed and victimized by the partisans; if they had not been so deceived and if so many of them had not been shot for so-called crimes; if the Soviet partisans, who grew up during the Stalin years, had not fanned the flames of Jew-hatred in the forest — then thousands more Jews would have come out of the forest alive . . ." (*From One Forest to the Next*, Sionim Chronicle, p. 124)

The family camps in the woods were the last bastion of Jewish family connectedness against which the destructive lust of anti-Semitic partisans was directed. Their rescue is associated with the brothers Tovye and Eshol Bielski, who were descended from an old family of Jewish villagers in the area of Novogrudek, and with Shimon Zarom from Minsk.

Yehoshua Yaffe, in *Sefer Milkhamot HaGetaot* (edited by Yitzhak Zuckerman and Moshe Basak, Tel Aviv, 1954) tells us about a family camp of the Bielski brothers:

. . . The number of people in the camp reached 1,230, including women, children and elderly people. The commandant, Eshol (Bielski), used to go out with his people in the area and conduct successful raids against the Germans . . . The work in the camp was well organized. Almost everyone had a function. Even the children were busy with their lessons in the camp school. Tovya Bielski, who was head of the camp guard, had sole responsibility for the security of the camp . . .

Elsewhere in the book, Yaffe asserts: "The commandant (Tovya Bielski) came to us with a few of his closest people . . . We felt safer and stronger . . . We trusted him. We believed he would protect, that he would save us . . . He used to say very firmly: 'The main thing is to save as many Jews as possible.' He always found time to talk with each one of us and to ask about our personal situation. . ."

Some partisan groups were organized by Jewish veterans of the Polish army. For example, liberated Jewish prisoners of war in the army stationed in Lublin created a partisan unit in the name of Emilia Plater (a well-known Polish freedom-fighter), with Moshe Yeager and Shmuel Gruber in command. This group later distinguished itself in a number of battles and

joined up with other partisan groups. After a number of engagements, it concentrated its efforts around Ostrow, near Lubartow, the partisan "capital." Its units were credited with safely transporting to the Russian side the leaders of post-war Poland — Osubka-Moravski, Marian Spicholski and Wladislaw Gomulka.

Compared to their gentile "comrades-in-arms," the situation of the Jewish partisans was extremely difficult. In all occupied countries the non-Jewish partisans had the full support of their governments. This was especially true in the Russian areas. The government gave the partisans the wherewithal to carry out sabotage operations against important enemy positions. It entrusted them with such tasks as cutting enemy communications lines and wrecking food and weapons

transports. In a word, the government helped create a second front in the rear of the enemy. The development of radio transmission, of air power and of new troop movement techniques raised the importance of that front and led to its integration into general battle strategy.

Utterly different was the fate of the Jewish partisans. They were not strengthened by any government, nor by a centrally organized body; nor did they have any previously worked out strategy. Without instructions, without money, without weapons, they still dared to follow the path of active resistance.

*Fighting Back* illuminates the role of Jewish partisans. It is an important contribution to the documentary literature, showing that not all Jews went to their slaughter like sheep — that the theory of Jewish "passivity" during World War II was totally false. □

## In Memoriam

**MIRIAM MANN**, a veteran of the Labor Zionist movement in Cincinnati, passed away on October 12th, leaving a great void in the ranks of the movement there. In eulogies by her close *haverim*, Miriam was likened to "A meteor's fleeting appearance and abrupt disappearance — her influence and charismatic leadership spanned over six decades." Miriam possessed charm, determination, vision and action. She was instrumental in initiating many projects, notably the *Lunch and Learn* monthly lecture series which continued for a decade. Following the death of her husband, Albert Mann, together with the local branch of LZA, she brought prominent local and national personalities to lecture at the Albert Mann Memorial Lectures. Miriam was also highly regarded as a reviewer of books, no matter how lengthy or complex. Her practical wisdom and dedicated idealism inspired generations of colleagues not only in Cincinnati but also nationally.

**MARSHA RAPPAPORT WIDETZKY**, formerly of Minneapolis and long-time member of Moshav Beth Herut, passed away in October after a brief illness. Coming from a highly motivated Labor Zionist family, it was natural for Marsha and her husband, Hy Widetzky, to go on Aliya with their young family. Her father, Eliyahu Nisan Rappaport, was a leader in

Labor Zionist circles in Minneapolis, and was in the nucleus that planned the establishment of what became Beth Herut, a moshav on the Sharon plain near Kfar Vitkin. Her mother Yona (Yentl) was active in Pioneer Women (now Na'amat USA). Marsha and family sailed for Israel on July 14, 1951, aboard the ZIM freighter, *S.S. Tel Aviv*, a voyage lasting three weeks. Established in 1933, the moshav flourished over the decades, expanding from just growing oranges to producing turkeys that were exported worldwide; later, the community started a silkscreen printing plant, and eventually a supermarket on the side of the main highway linking Tel Aviv and Haifa. The Widetzky's were an integral part of the life and development of Beth Herut.

Besides her husband, Marsha leaves behind two daughters — Judi Widetzky, co-chair of the World Labor Zionist Federation, who will become director of the Aliya Department of the World Zionist Organization and its representative in Washington, D.C. in January; and Elie Aloni, who is chairperson of the Department of Economy, Employment & Vocational Training of Na'amat in Israel.

The American Labor Zionist Alliance mourns the loss of two *chaverot*, here and in Israel, whose lives exemplified the finest characteristics of our movement. □